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Atari Online News, Etc.
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-* Intel Drops Out of the OLPC Program *-
-* Oz Plan To Filter Internet Comes Under Fire *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard
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"Saying it like it is!"

Ahhh, 2008 - another new year has arrived. Nice and cold, too cold! Fortunately, we're going to get our January thaw earlier than usual! It can get brutally cold around these parts at times; and I'm not a big fan of this kind of weather!

In fact, this weather is part of the reason we stay close to home, if not actually at home, for New Year's Eve. Like most years, we spent our New Year's Eve quietly. My wife read for most of the night, and I had a few drinks, listened to some tunes from yesteryear, and played a video game or three. Saw the ball drop in Times Square, while noticing that Dick Clark finally looks his age! Welcome to 2008!

And of course, with the new year come the presidential primaries and caucuses. Egads, 11 months of political rhetoric thrown at us from every angle. Not for the faint of heart, I can assure you!

Although not the best of segues, I wanted to thank all of you who have continued to send us cards and letters! I won't drop any more names, but we do appreciate the occasional pat on the back - that helps to keep us going from week to week. We realize that there's just not a plethora of Atari-related news to bring to your attention each week. Heck, there isn't much to bring you once a month! But, when any news comes across our monitors, we'll bring it your way! But remember, it's been quite awhile since Atari - as we knew it - was "flourishing" and we were all fanatical and waiting for each new piece of hardware and software that we could get our hands on. Ancient history, technologically. But it's amazing that Atari stuff still holds a fond portion in our hearts. Like yesteryear, we're still waiting in anticipation for something new to whet our appetite.

So, let's keep good thoughts, hoping that the faithful continue to do some work to support our chosen platform, even if that platform has taken a backseat to today's technological wonders. Happy New Year!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. Well, here we are at the start of 2008. I'm not even going to pretend that there are enough messages in the NewsGroup to justify a column this week. There just aren't. But, being the first issue of the year, I just don't feel right about skipping out and letting you get off scott-free. [grin]

Soooo... what do we talk about? Well, you might not be totally sick and tired of hearing about Britany Spears or any of the other 'Pop Tarts' currently fueling the tabloids and news magazines.

Okay, okay. I'm not going to talk about poor little Brit or her knocked-up sister. I DO find it amusing, though, that with the problems these two girls are having, their poor mother may have to put the release of her book on parenting on hold.

No, I'm NOT kidding. You can't make this stuff up.

As I type this, the results of the Iowa caucuses are coming in. You've no doubt heard all kinds of stuff about 'the caucuses' by now, but if you're like most people, you don't have a good idea of what they really are. Don't feel bad. Neither do I. My state has a primary instead of a caucus. A primary is much more like a straight-up pre-election election to choose someone to run in the 'big' election. The Iowa Caucus doesn't directly 'choose' a candidate.

We're not going to go step-by-step through the process because, quite frankly, it confuses the hell out of me. But it basically goes like this: Voters get together with other voters of the same party (only the big two parties). They debate the strengths and weaknesses of the available candidates and, in the end, vote for the one that they like. There's more to it than that, but that's the basic idea. The Republicans and Democrats each have their own processes and rules, but in the end, each party ends up doing the same thing... casting votes according to who each voter likes.

While you've no doubt heard about a "winner" for each side, it's more accurate to think of it as rating the candidates, since there's no penalty or disqualification or anything like that.

I guess the big surprise in the Iowa caucus was that former Arkansas governor and baptist minster Mike Huckabee has come from behind and won on the republican side.

No, I'm NOT kidding. You can't make this stuff up.

As we head into 2008, it's interesting to look back at 2007. We had Michael Moore telling us about how bad our medical insurance situation is and Al Gore telling us how bad the global warming situation is. Teachers and parents are getting more comfortable with the idea that faith is not science... and doesn't need to be. While they were busy kicking faith-based pseudo-theory Intelligent Design out of the classroom, two 'Creation Museums' have opened up and are ready for public visits. I'm not sure about one of them, but the other one has Man and dinosaurs existing side-by-side, with the dinosaurs being saddled and ridden by early man. To quote a comedian/commentator, I knew

that this idea was bull back when I was a kid... and it was called "The Flintstones".

We've still got people who don't understand the difference between the scientific method and faith, people still denying the effects of global warming, and people trying to tell us that our medical insurance system is doing just fine.

No, I'm NOT kidding. You can't make this stuff up.

And finally, with my head turning toward politics, I've again started checking in with my favorite political polling site, www.electoral-vote.com.

I didn't know this when I'd first found the site, but it is the brainchild of Andrew Tanenbaum, the author of a slew of textbooks on general computing, networking, and distributed computing, and the creator of MINIX and the MINIX file system. The only reason this jumped out at me is that I used MINIX FS for accessing the internet with "The TAF Disks"... remember that setup? What a bear THAT was, huh? Installing MiNT with MINIX FS, installing and running an X-Windows like system, and that browser... oh, what was it called??? Oh yeah, Chimera (pronounced Ky-Mare-Uh). If I remember correctly, we had to do this at the outset because of the TCP/IP protocol, which didn't exist on the ST platform yet. Oh those were the days, huh? Shortly thereafter, came the CAB browser and a couple of dialer setups for the ST, and we didn't need to do that crazy stuff anymore. But it WAS fun, wasn't it? I'm not kidding... all that digging and hacking and tweaking and swearing and sweating may not have amounted to much, and it certainly hasn't changed the world, but it kept me off the streets and out of trouble, and kept me in contact with a great bunch of people... the folks in the Atari world who were digging and hacking and tweaking and swearing and sweating right along with me. Gawd, I long for those days again.

No, I'm NOT kidding. You can't make this stuff up.

Well, that's it for this week. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Xbox Live Woes Gets Freebie!
"~~~~~" Into The World of Wolves!
Light-Gun Games Revival!
And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Video Game Looks Into World of Wolves

The new video game "WolfQuest" allows players to follow the call of the wild in the role of a wolf in Yellowstone National Park.

Players learn quickly, with help from realistic graphics, that wolves do a lot of running - across plains, through forests and up and down steep slopes.

"You have to learn how to hunt, survive, defend your territory and ultimately find a mate and establish your own pack," said project director Grant Spickelmier, assistant education director at Minnesota Zoo in Apple Valley.

The first episode, "Amethyst Mountain," was officially released Dec. 20 as a free download at <http://www.wolfquest.org>. Spickelmier said the game had been downloaded 13,500 times by Wednesday.

The Minnesota Zoo developed "WolfQuest" with Eduweb, an educational software developer in St. Paul, on a \$508,253 National Science Foundation grant. Other partners include the National Zoo in Washington, the Phoenix Zoo, Yellowstone and the International Wolf Center in Ely.

The game is aimed at ages 10 to 15 because kids that age have largely stopped going to zoos and are more interested in things like video games, Spickelmier said.

"We're hoping to capture some of those kids back with this game," he said, adding that the Minnesota Zoo also hopes to interest kids in wolf conservation and biology.

Eleven-year-old Riley Breckheimer, of Apple Valley, tried out "WolfQuest" at its launch party at the zoo and declared it "pretty cool." He said he took down one snowshoe hare and got an elk about halfway down. The game also gave him new respect for wolves.

"They can run over miles and miles of area just to get to one elk to get something to eat," he said. "It's not like humans where humans have to go just a few blocks to the grocery store."

It's not the first time a zoo has offered computer games. The San Diego Zoo, National and the New York Zoos and Aquarium have games for younger kids on their Web sites. Nor is it the first time a video game has simulated wolf life: the DOS game "Wolf" was released in 1994.

But Steve Feldman, spokesman for the American Zoo Association, said "WolfQuest" takes things to a higher level.

"The level of realism, and also the goal, which is to effect real conservation behavior change, is what make this game unique," Feldman said.

In the first episode, as a solitary wolf roaming Amethyst Mountain in Yellowstone, players chase down elk and hares, relying on their eyes and sense of smell. When the "scent vision" screen toggles on, the background

goes black and white and scent trails light up. The screen also shows how old the trails are.

To howl like a wolf, players just hit the "H" key, which in future episodes will help draw in their pack.

"WolfQuest" can be played alone or with up to five players online, where players also can connect and share tips. Additional episodes due in 2008 will explore other areas of Yellowstone and allow players to establish territory (yes, by lifting a leg) and defend their elk carcasses against hungry grizzly bears, raise pups and even kill sheep on nearby ranches.

The game won praise from David Walsh, president of the National Institute on Media and the Family, a group that studies the impact of media on children's health and development and often makes news for its criticism of violent video games.

"It's got great educational value while at the same time it's engaging," Walsh said. "It's a good alternative to the shoot 'em up games that are so popular with that age group. ... I think this game has the potential to chart some new territory."

WolfQuest: <http://www.wolfquest.org>

Minnesota Zoo: <http://www.mnzoo.org>

Eduweb: <http://www.eduweb.com>

National Institute on Media and the Family: <http://www.mediafamily.org>

Nintendo Revives The Light-Gun Game

Most gamers who grew up in the 1980s have fond memories of "Duck Hunt," one of the games that came with the Nintendo Entertainment System. Your controller was a plastic gun, the Zapper, that you used to shoot on-screen ducks; if you missed, your hunting dog would snicker.

Despite the ubiquity of the Zapper and "Duck Hunt," light-gun games for home consoles never really caught on. For the last decade, Namco Bandai's "Time Crisis" series has pretty much had the genre to itself, although if you visit an arcade you're likely to see a broader selection (with bigger weapons).

Nintendo's Zapper has a spiritual successor in the Wii console's remote control, which you operate by pointing directly at your TV screen. And Nintendo has acknowledged the connection by introducing a new version of the Zapper - essentially, a plastic doohickey that turns the Wii's remote-and-nunchaku combo into a two-handed firearm. It's not exactly state-of-the-art technology, but it does add something fresh to the first-person shooter.

* "Link's Crossbow Training" (Nintendo, \$19.99 with the Wii Zapper): The game that's packaged with the Zapper isn't the deepest title in the Wii library, but it's a fast-paced challenge that just about anyone can enjoy. You are Link, the hero of Nintendo's "Legend of Zelda" series, and "Crossbow Training" takes you on a whirlwind tour of sites from 2006's "Twilight Princess."

There are three kinds of competition: target shooting, in which you have to fire at (mostly) stationary bull's-eyes; defender, in which enemies come at you from all sides; and ranger, in which you have to hunt down your foes. Accuracy pays off, because your score is multiplied by the number of consecutive targets you hit - but other people I played with had just as much fun shooting willy-nilly.

There are a few surprises. For example, if you shoot a glowing green monster you get rapid-fire powers for a brief period. The ranger levels are a little tougher because you have to move with the nunchaku while swiveling your weapon with the Zapper. And the game can get quite competitive when you have four players taking turns on the firing range. Overall, the simplicity of "Crossbow Training" makes it a lively party game. Two-and-a-half stars out of four.

* "Medal of Honor Heroes 2" (Electronic Arts, \$49.99): EA's long-running World War II series has been eclipsed in recent years by "Call of Duty" and "Brothers in Arms," but there still may be some life in the old soldier yet. There's nothing original plot-wise - hey, welcome back to Omaha Beach! - but the savvy use of the Wii controller makes "Heroes 2" feel brand new.

An arcade mode, designed specifically for the Zapper, moves you across the terrain automatically and lets you focus on the fun part: shooting Nazis. It has the somewhat cartoonish feel of a classic light-gun game like "House of the Dead," but it's fast and accessible for players who have never tried a first-person shooter before.

More serious gamers will go right to the campaign mode. Aside from the usual running, shooting and hiding, you need to use the Wii remote to throw grenades, tune enemy radios or set explosives - actions that are easier to execute without the Zapper. Still, with its intuitive controls and precise gunplay, "Heroes 2" is one of the Wii's best shooters yet. Three stars.

* "Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles" (Capcom, \$49.99): Like the arcade version of "Heroes 2," "Umbrella Chronicles" moves you along a predetermined path; your only job is to shoot the zombies and other monsters that want to eat you. It's not as satisfying as, say, 2005's "Resident Evil 4," but it's good, brainless fun.

"Chronicles" recreates classic scenarios from previous games in the series, and fans will enjoy the trip down memory lane. But a newcomer can have fun too, particularly when joining forces with a veteran in one of the cooperative levels.

The aiming isn't accurate enough, especially when you need to hit a small spot on a very large beast. And some of the boss fights seem unfair, with difficulty levels that are way out of whack with the rest of the game. Having a helper definitely makes the ordeal more manageable - and enjoyable. Two-and-a-half stars.

Microsoft Promises Free Game After Online Woes

Microsoft Corp. said on Thursday it will offer a free downloadable video game to users of its Xbox online gaming service after the network was

2600, last seen in retail stores over fifteen years ago.

The Video Game Summit, now in its fifth year, brings together retrogamers from all over the country to swap stories, games and to compete in sanctioned tournaments. The event is open to the public and people of all ages with an interest in video games or computers are encouraged to attend. According to the event's organizer, Dan Iacovelli, "we plan to have several gaming consoles set to free play and a trade room where collectors will be free to swap their extra games." Best of all, admission is free!

The Video Game Summit will run from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m. and will be held in the Heron Point Building adjacent to the Fairfield Inn located at 645 West North Avenue in Lombard, Illinois.

Registration is open now at
http://avc.atari-users.net/Events/VGS_files/register.html.

Dan Iacovelli is available to answer any questions at (708) 273-6029 or VideoGameSummit@yahoo.com.

Dan Iacovelli is the chairperson of Atari Video Club and has published a retrogaming fanzine "Atari Zone" since 1993 (for more information on AVC visit: <http://avc.atari-users.net>)

For information: <http://avc.atari-users.net/VGS.html> or
Contact: VideoGameSummit@yahoo.com or
Phone: (708) 273-6029
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(also be sure to visit the VGS website for news on our game show)

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Australia's Plans To Filter Internet Under Fire

An Australian government plan to filter the Internet Wednesday drew criticism from privacy advocates who said it represented the start of state censorship.

Communications Minister Stephen Conroy, a member of the Labor team which ousted conservative prime minister John Howard in a November election, wants filters in place to shield children from online porn and violence.

Under the plan, Internet service providers would provide feeds filtered free of pornography and other inappropriate material to houses and schools.

Conroy has rejected criticism that the move will debase the freedom of the world wide web and represents a step towards the kind of Internet censorship in place in China where sites are regularly blocked and cyberdissidents arrested.

"Labor makes no apologies to those that argue that any regulation of the Internet is like going down the Chinese road," he told national radio on Monday.

"If people equate freedom of speech with watching child pornography, then the Rudd Labor government is going to disagree."

But chair of the Australian Privacy Foundation Roger Clarke said the plan would not only be ineffective but could have substantial side-effects.

"Many pages will end up getting blocked that shouldn't be blocked," he told AFP. "We don't need that, we need an open Internet."

Clarke said it was the role of parents and guardians, not the government, to protect children from inappropriate material.

"It's not the government's business to control information flows," he said.

"That's the kind of thing that goes on in oppressive countries, in authoritarian countries.

"That's not what the government is there to do."

Peter Coroneos, spokesman for the Internet Industry Association, said providers were already providing free filters and the industry was unsure whether the plan would work.

"At the moment we don't know what the extent of it will be, what it will cost, and whether it will set a precedent for other changes.

"We just don't know if it is feasible," he told Sydney's Daily Telegraph.

Conroy said Internet users would be able to access uncensored material by opting out of the service and that the government would work with industry to ensure the filters did not slow down the service.

"There are people who are going to make all sorts of statements about the impact on the speed," he said.

"But that is why we are engaged constructively with the sector, engaging in trials to find a way to implement this in the best possible way and to work with the sector."

Intel Drops Out of One Laptop Per Child Program

Intel said on Thursday it will drop out of the One Laptop Per Child project and resign from the board after the project's board demanded the chipmaker stop supporting other efforts in emerging markets.

One Laptop Per Child (OLPC), a nonprofit project run by MIT professor Nicholas Negroponte, aimed to sell \$100 laptops to the world's poor children.

But it began selling in October for \$200 through a donor program to finance the program's launch.

The OLPC board "had asked Intel to end its support for non-OLPC platforms including the Classmate PC and other systems," Intel spokesman Chuck Mulloy said. "They wanted us to focus our support exclusively on the OLPC system."

A representative for the OLPC project was not immediately reachable.

Mulloy said Intel decided to drop out after six months of discussion.

Intel last year introduced the Classmate, a laptop for developing markets. It is likely to have other projects this year.

"We've always said there will be many solutions. The most important priority is to serve the need," he said

Webroot Delivers Real-Time Defense Against Malicious Code

In today's Internet world, protecting end-user PCs from the unknown is one of the most important things you can do. No matter how a system is compromised - be it a virus or a "drive-by" install of malicious code via a Web site - there is no end to the amount of irritation and potential financial damage that the user or company might suffer. With most attacks zeroing in on identity theft, can you really take a chance?

The best way to defend PCs is to have some sort of anti-virus and anti-spyware protection - and real-time protection trumps traditional on-demand scans. Real-time anti-virus protection has been around for years, but only recently have we started to see vendors roll out real-time analysis and detection of malware. Like its real-time anti-virus counterpart, this approach ensures malicious code is stopped before it ever lands.

Among companies packaging real-time protection against viruses and malware is Webroot Software. The recently released 5.5 version of Webroot AntiVirus with AntiSpyware and Firewall provides real-time and on-demand detection and remediation for virus and malware threats, and it boasts an easy-to-use user interface. Resource utilization is minimal, and in my tests, there was no noticeable slowdown while browsing the Web. This package is intended for single users or small office installations; there is no administrative console or central management. Business users that need more administrative tools should look at Webroot AntiSpyware Corporate Edition with AntiVirus.

United front The Webroot system comprises two separate yet complementary engines. Through its partnership with Sophos, Webroot is able to totally integrate Sophos' anti-virus protection into its package, providing protection against all types of digital threats. New to this release is the addition of behavioral detection in the anti-virus product; previously, only signature-based virus detection was available. Now even zero-day threats can be dealt with as the system monitors the overall

behavior of the running processes and data streams.

I tested Webroot AntiVirus with AntiSpyware and Firewall on a Windows XP Pro PC with 512MB of RAM (both packages are Vista-compatible) and carefully monitored system resource utilization during all aspects of my testing. Under normal operation during my tests, RAM usage averaged around 5MB and jumped up to about 90MB during full system scans. CPU usage during a full scan averaged around 25 percent with some spikes, but they were nearly unnoticeable when using the PC. The solution now supports Firefox in addition to Internet Explorer but is available for 32-bit operating systems only.

Webroot AntiVirus with AntiSpyware uses a number of shields to define the type and level of protection offered by the product. For example, the Execution shield monitors and protects the PC against executing applications, while the File System shield looks at each read and write to disk for suspicious activity. In all, there are 17 different shields organized into five groups protecting the various portions of the PC's system.

To protect and serve The Network Shields go a long way toward helping prevent infections. Here, Webroot will block access to common ad sites, lock down the HOSTS file, and most important, deny access to Web sites known to be sources of malware. Webroot maintains the list of potentially malicious Web sites and updates it daily. When testing this feature, I tried to browse a lyrics Web site that Webroot deemed a threat. The solution prevented access to the site and displayed a warning as to why it was blocked. The system does allow a user to access a site if he or she believes it was blocked incorrectly (at the user's own risk, of course). In this release, there is no way to whitelist a specific Web site while blocking others, meaning that if a user returns to the same blocked site at a later time, he or she will have to go through the blocked/override process again.

When Webroot detects viruses or malware, the default action is to quarantine them. I found it very easy to manage the items in my quarantine and even rescued programs. Users can right-click a quarantined item and tell Webroot to ignore it on future scans. Another feature I like is that Webroot creates a list of scanned items, and as long as they haven't changed since the previous scan, Webroot will skip over it, reducing overall scan times.

I tested all aspects of Webroot's detection ability, trying to infect my test PC over the network and Internet. I attempted to compromise my system first by copying infected files from a network share, then by pushing files to a file share on the test systems. Both times Webroot either blocked the file as it was being copied, or when accessed, it prevented me from infecting my PC. This was true no matter how the virus was packaged: as a normal file or compressed inside a zip archive. Testing over the Internet involved malicious Web sites as well as virus-infected e-mails. In all cases, Webroot correctly denied access with no false positives.

Fight fire with fire Webroot's Desktop Firewall is available free of charge to Webroot customers, and it comes bundled with the AntiVirus with AntiSpyware package. Unlike a lot of other "free" utilities, Desktop Firewall actually comes packed with quite a few features, far surpassing Microsoft's built-in firewall. There are customizable levels of protection, and it allows for different security profiles for home, office, and remote access. It includes a learning mode that builds a

baseline profile for CPU use, running processes and such, and works with the baseline to clamp down on unusual activity. Also included are real-time lists of running processes and port usage to help identify abnormal activity.

Webroot AntiVirus with AntiSpyware and Firewall is a very good value and offers a lot of first-rate protection for a very reasonable price. The real-time malware and virus protection work very well, and the quarantine service is easy to manage. I like how the various shields worked together to provide the overall security posture while still allowing a level of customization. When shopping for an anti-virus, anti-malware product for your home office or small business, don't overlook Webroot's offering.

Researcher Accuses Sears of Spreading Spyware

Sears and Kmart customers who sign up for a new marketing program may be giving up more private information than they'd bargained for, a prominent anti-spyware researcher claims.

According to Harvard Business School Assistant Professor Ben Edelman, Sears Holdings' My SHC Community program falls short of U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) standards by failing to notify users exactly what happens when they download the company's marketing software.

And given the invasive nature of the product, Sears has an obligation to make its behavior clearer to users. "The software is not something you'd want on your computer or the computer of anyone you care about," Edelman said in an interview. "It tracks every site you go to, every search you make, every product you buy, and every product you look at but don't buy. It's just spooky."

Edelman has posted an analysis of Sears's software describing its operation and his concerns.

Problems with the retailer's My SHC Community program were first brought to light in late December, when CA senior engineer Benjamin Googins wrote a blog entry criticizing the software, which was written by VoiceFive, a subsidiary of Internet measurement firm ComScore.

Sears launched the My SHC Community in March, intending it to be a vehicle for customers who want a voice in the company's direction. "It's still kind of in its early days," said Rob Harles, vice president of MY SHC Community, in an interview conducted prior to Edelman's post. "It's mainly used right now for research, but what we want to do is open it up so it's creating dialogue with our customers."

Sears Holdings, the owner of the Sears Roebuck and Kmart department stores is the third-largest retailer in the U.S.

Sears offers members \$10, and a chance to win one of several sweepstakes as an extra incentive to join the program.

But in return, a small percentage of members must install extremely invasive software.

According to Googins, the product monitors not only all of the user's Web traffic, but also keeps track of secure sessions such as visits to bank

sites, sniffs through email headers, and then sends that information to a ComScore.

While Googins called the software "a significant threat to privacy," Harles doesn't see it that way. First off, he said that members can join the community with or without the tracking software and that less than 10 percent of the members have signed up for the tracking program.

And those who get the tracking software installed have all personally identifying information scrubbed by ComScore, and are informed of exactly what's going on, he added.

Harles sent Googins a detailed rebuttal to his claims, which the CA researcher has published on his blog.

Edelman said Monday the Sears executive is simply wrong. "The comments from... Rob Harles are remarkable," he said via e-mail. "Exactly contrary to actual facts, as best I can tell."

Sears does disclose that it is installing tracking software, but doesn't do enough to make sure that users have seen these disclosures before they download the program, Edelman said in his analysis.

"The FTC requires that software makers and distributors provide clear, prominent, unavoidable notice of the key terms," he wrote. "SHC's installation of ComScore did nothing of the kind."

In an interview, Harles said that Sears had no immediate plans to change its disclosure policies, but he did say that My SHC Community would undoubtedly evolve in some ways.

This isn't the first time ComScore's software has been in the news. In June, Edelman documented how they company's tracking software was being installed on some PCs without consent.

"Why so many problems for ComScore?" Edelman wrote in his latest blog posting. "The basic challenge is that users don't want ComScore software. ComScore offers users nothing sufficiently valuable to compensate them for the serious privacy invasion ComScore's software entails. There's no good reason why users should share information about their browsing, purchasing, and other online activities. So time and time again, ComScore and its partners resort to trickery (or worse) to get their software onto users' PCs."

UK Prepares Prosecutors for Computer Crime Law

U.K. prosecutors have received guidance on interpreting amendments to a computer crime law that introduce stronger penalties for computer hacking.

A six-page document published on Monday by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) gives prosecutors pointers for handling offenses under soon-to-change provisions of the Computer Misuse Act (CMA) of 1990.

The amendments were passed into law in November 2006 but have not yet come into force. The changes are designed to strengthen the government's ability to prosecute and punish hackers, and increase penalties for

accessing systems without authorization.

Computer security professionals have expressed concern about the drafting of the changes, however.

The most-discussed change, contained in Section 3A of the CMA, makes it illegal for someone to create an application that is "likely" to be used for hacking. But the precise definition of "likely" has prompted fears the law could potentially target those undertaking activities such as penetration testing.

According to the CPS document, prosecutors should look at what an application does and who its creator thought would use it. Conditions to consider would be whether the hacking tool was given to a "closed and vetted list of IT security professionals or was posted openly," CPS said.

Prosecutors should also find out whether the tool has a legitimate purpose, if it has a large installation base and whether it's commercially sold.

Some applications will "have a dual use, and prosecutors need to ascertain that the subject has a criminal intent," CPS said. Possession of a program is not enough to prosecute, it said.

Computer security researchers "might find some comfort in this guidance" since criminal intent must be demonstrated, said Struan Robertson, senior associate with law firm Pinsent Masons.

The guidance is generally acceptable, wrote Richard Clayton, a computer scientist at the University of Cambridge, on his blog. But using the criterion of whether a hacking program is available for sale ignores the fact that much software is free, Clayton said.

On another issue, the document also clarifies what constitutes unauthorized access to a computer, a crime under Section 1 of the amended CMA. The defendant must know that the intended access wasn't permitted, and prosecutors must show that the person intended to improperly access information from the computer.

IBM Sued for Cancer Cluster

The birthplace of Big Blue is now the focal point of a massive lawsuit contending IBM released over decades toxic and hazardous contaminants into the environment of New York's Village of Endicott and the town of Union. IBM opened its first plant in the area in 1924.

The lawsuit, filed Jan. 3 in Broome County, N.Y., by a band of law firms representing about 90 plaintiffs, claims the hundreds of thousands of pounds of toxic and hazardous chemicals, including TCE (trichloroethylene), released into the soil, air and groundwater are now vaporizing into the homes, businesses and churches of Endicott and Union.

As the result, the lawsuit claims, medical problems stemming from IBM's actions include congenital heart defects in infants and kidney cancer in adults. A recent New York State Department of Health Study found the two illnesses occur at a significantly higher rate in Endicott than the rest of the state.

The defendants are seeking unspecified damages for property devaluation and loss of business value and income, including interest; for personal injuries, medical monitoring, nuisance and trespass in an amount that exceeds the jurisdiction limits of all lower courts; and for punitive damages.

"[IBM], a sophisticated scientific business entity whose business involved, in part, use of and knowledge about organic chemicals, knew or, in the exercise of reasonable care, should have known that the volatile organic chemicals that had wrongfully discharged," the lawsuit states, "would remain volatile in the soil for substantial periods of time, exceeding decades, and would migrate, as vapors, into the homes, businesses, schools and churches located above the contaminated groundwater plume."

IBM has been hit with a poaching lawsuit. [Click here to read more.](#)

Lawyers for the plaintiffs said the lawsuit is the first in a series of civil actions against IBM that will be filed in the coming months. The complaints include wrongful death, personal injury, property damage, business and income loss, medical monitoring, nuisance, and trespass.

IBM spokesman Mike Maloney told eWEEK the lawsuit has "no basis in science or law, and IBM will defend itself rigorously."

IBM sold its Endicott plant, which manufactured circuit boards, integrated circuits, printers and computer systems, in 2002 but retains extensive operations in the area. In 1979, IBM began a groundwater mediation program, and in 2002 the company launched a vapor ventilation initiative, including more than \$2 billion in grants to local property owners for ventilation systems.

CES To Highlight Tech for Greening Homes

While most electronics companies are still trying to establish green credentials, 2008 could mark a turning point for previously obscure "home automation" technologies that now are being advertised as a way to save electricity - not just personal energy.

With systems that dim lights from a TV remote control or "smart" meters that help cut power usage during costly peak times, the environmental benefits of home automation will be touted at next week's International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas.

Systems that let people configure lights, security and entertainment devices from single control points are not new. But like most technologies, early buyers mainly have been hobbyists or wealthy consumers willing to spend thousands outfitting their homes with smart controls.

Now the industry hopes that high energy costs and environmental awareness - combined with people's desire to manage entertainment content from single control points - will push home automation into the mainstream.

"Green is becoming a big part of why a connected home makes sense," said Mike Seamons, a vice president at Exceptional Innovation LLC, which sells

the Lifeware line of home-automation products.

At CES, Lifeware will be showcasing its version of the "brain" at the center of a smart home. It's a \$2,500-and-up home server, configurable from a computer or an entertainment system remote, that can relay media content around the house and talk to wirelessly linked light switches, thermostats and alarms.

Smart versions of those household items can cost several times more than standard ones. But when networked, they can be set to make intelligent decisions tending toward energy conservation. For example, when you arm your security system, you can automatically have your lights turned off.

Or you can ease your home's heating or cooling demands without getting off the couch.

"The same remote control you use for changing the channel on your TV set, you can use to change your room temperature," said Bob Heile, chairman of the ZigBee Alliance, which represents 250 companies whose devices use the ZigBee wireless standard for data communication. "More and more things are starting to be tied together. ... The energy issue will accelerate the deployment."

Even if consumers aren't motivated enough by energy savings to check out home automation, their electric utilities likely are, given the costs or regulatory issues hindering the construction of new power plants.

That's why home-automation maker Control4 Corp. is testing ways for electricity providers to subsidize "smart" meters that help people recognize expensive peak power times in which electricity reductions are most beneficial.

One idea being tested is to give people a "utility channel" on their TVs that shows their homes' real-time energy consumption and how the monthly electric bill would be trimmed by certain tweaks - like turning up the fridge a few degrees.

"If the consumer can have an interactive experience with their home, then they can actually start to reduce their energy usage in a way that has a huge impact for the utility company," said Will West, Control4's CEO. His company will be part of a panel discussion of the subject at CES.

For now, smart homes are a small enough market that consumers with green motives might be able to give it a meaningful nudge. Parks Associates analyst Bill Ablondi estimates the market for home controls at roughly \$3.5 billion in the U.S. in 2007, headed to \$6 billion by 2012.

However, Ablondi believes many U.S. consumers find entertainment a bigger selling point, as home automation systems let people shuttle music and movies from the Internet all over the house.

And Forrester Research analyst Christopher Mines argues that mass adoption of home automation will depend less on green ideals and more on whether the systems get easier to install and use.

"That, to me, is the bugaboo of so many of these whiz-bang home technologies for consumers," Mines said. "My guess is that you will still see some pretty complex stuff that is not intuitive."

Mac Tablet Makes Its First Appearance

Amid rumors of a tablet computer being launched by Apple at the upcoming Macworld Expo trade show, a California company has taken the lead by launching its own Mac-based tablet.

Axiotron said that its ModBook is an aftermarket hardware modification of a standard Apple MacBook, and is intended for those times when "a keyboard only gets in the way." The device was announced a year ago, at the 2007 Macworld Expo in San Francisco.

As with other tablets, the user can write and draw directly on the ModBook screen. The new tablet uses handwriting-recognition technology that is already embedded in the Mac operating system.

The pen digitizer offers 133 position updates per second and 512 pressure levels, with three different kinds of replaceable pen tips for different drawing styles. For drawing, users can rest their hand on the screen without generating marks because the pen is radio-based. The cursor can be controlled even when the pen hovers over the screen.

In fact, Axiotron said that the ModBook offers a paper-like writing sensation, in part because the LCD screen has been acid-treated to achieve an etched surface.

The product, which starts at \$2,290, also has a built-in iSight camera, built-in 802.11a/b/g/n wireless, Bluetooth 2.0, and an integrated CD/DVD drive that is upgradable.

Tablets are designed for mobile use, and the ModBook is certainly built for rugged travel. Axiotron said it is the first portable Mac with optional GPS, and that its top shell and interior display frame are constructed from aircraft-quality magnesium alloy for durability.

The top shell is plated with chrome over copper and nickel layers, which the company said offers protection against scratches and oxidation. In addition, the LCD panel has a replaceable screen cover made from a chemically strengthened material that Axiotron calls ForceGlass.

The mobile market is where the tablet "has proven itself for commercial uses," noted IDC analyst Doug Bell, who said that utility workers, hospital personnel, and on-the-floor factory management are some on-your-feet professionals for whom a tablet computer is worth the price.

But the ModBook doesn't have specific business applications, he noted. Bell said that these applications might include new ways to use multimedia, such as photos or movies.

Tablet computers raise the possibility of new uses for multitouch interfaces, of the kind made famous by Apple's iPhone. There are industry expectations that Apple eventually will endow other devices with a multitouch interface, which, for instance, allows users to make images larger or smaller by opening and closing two fingers on the screen.

Bell added that "multitouch is definitely on the horizon" for computers from Apple and others, and said he is "bullish" on the growth prospects for tablets.

U.S. Bans Spare Lithium Batteries From Checked Bags

New rules will go into effect on Jan. 1 that prohibit air passengers in the U.S. from carrying spare lithium batteries in their checked baggage.

The new rules, announced Friday by the U.S. Department of Transport, are designed to reduce the risk of fires in aircraft. Lithium batteries have been identified as a possible cause of several aircraft fires.

Passengers will still be able to carry lithium batteries in checked bags if they are installed in a device like a laptop or digital camera. But loose batteries will need to be put in a plastic bag and carried on the plane as hand luggage, the DOT said.

The rules also limit each passenger to two "extended-life" lithium batteries. These are larger batteries with more than 8 grams of equivalent lithium content, examples of which are pictured in the DOT's statement.

The rules are also described at the SafeTravel.dot.gov Web site.

In February 2006 a United Parcel Service flight landed at Philadelphia International Airport after the crew detected a fire in its cargo. The National Transportation Safety Board said later that it found several burned out laptop batteries on the plane, and could not rule them out as a possible cause of the fire.

Lithium batteries are a fire hazard because of the heat they can generate when they are damaged or suffer a short circuit, the NTSB said at a hearing about the Philadelphia incident last July.

"Several lithium battery incidents have occurred in recent years, including a lithium-ion battery fire that occurred less than two months ago on an airplane in Chicago," the NTSB said.

Several big makers of laptops and cell phones, including Dell and Nokia, have recalled batteries recently because of flaws that created a potential fire hazard.

Malware Evolving Too Fast for Antivirus Apps

If you think that the latest security suites afford complete protection against malware attacks, think again. Today's for-profit malware pushers use dedicated test labs and other increasingly professional techniques to improve their chances of infecting your computer. And the techniques they employ to outpace security software makers appear to be working.

Make no mistake - a good security program can go a long way toward keeping you in control of your system. But PC World's recent tests of security suites found that new malware easily evaded the applications. In our tests of how well security software blocks unknown malicious programs, the best performer detected only one in four new malware samples. In contrast, February 2007 results from similar heuristics

testing showed that the best utilities caught about half of new samples.

"In this industry, unlike others, we have an antagonist we have to deal with, someone we're constantly battling back and forth with," says Hiep Dang, director of antimalware research with McAfee's Avert Labs. "The bad guys have the element of surprise."

Even just a 12-hour head start can translate into thousands of infected PCs, and malware authors have long tested their programs against antivirus applications to make sure they get that critical jump on the opposition. VirusTotal.com and similar Web sites, which allow security researchers and consumers to submit a questionable file and have it scanned by more than 30 different antivirus engines, have unfortunately made the testing easier for malware writers: Crooks can continue to tweak their new malware projects until VirusTotal or one of the other new multilanguage sites shows that the rogue application can slip past the majority of antivirus programs.

Bad guys' use of sites such as VirusTotal can have a hidden benefit. After online thugs submit a sample, VirusTotal can sometimes share it with security companies, which can then update their programs to block the new malware. But the site permits users to opt out of having their samples submitted to antivirus vendors. VirusTotal says it offers the option so that people can scan sensitive files at the site without having them broadcast to companies.

Some well-organized criminal groups go a step farther and "maintain their own antivirus setups, almost like their own VirusTotal," according to Don Jackson, senior security researcher with the security services firm SecureWorks.

Jackson says the opportunities for prerelease testing make for harder-to-catch malware - and underscore why smart PC users should never assume that their machines are immune to attack. For example, almost every day, SecureWorks sees new variants of the PRG Trojan horse made with a particular kit. And when the new versions first appear, usually only 25 percent of antivirus scanners detect them, he says.

As bad as all of that might seem, don't throw in the towel and resign yourself to the inevitability of infection. For one thing, antivirus programs can do very well once their creators learn about a new sample. When fully updated and pitted against PC World partner AV-Test's "zoo" of 675,000 Trojan horses, keyloggers, and other malware, the best-performing security suites detected 98 percent of them.

And security companies are aware of the challenge they face in keeping pace with nimble online thieves. McAfee and Symantec are focusing on additional layers of security, including firewalls and behavioral scanners, which detect malicious software based on its behavior rather than on a signature match.

Multilayered security is important, but you are the most important component by far. AV-Test's results (and other security analyses) show that no program can provide complete protection. Some malicious and creative entrepreneur will always discover a way around any particular security program.

Getting around you can be much harder for malware creators, however, if you follow basic precautions. Crooks are quick to pounce on fresh program vulnerabilities, so be sure to keep all of your applications -

not just your Web browser and Windows - up-to-date to seal off entire avenues of attack. Also, the best social-engineering tactics often accompany the newest and hardest-to-detect malware. If you assume that every unexpected e-mail attachment is an attack, and ask for confirmation from the sender before opening any attachment, you'll block another huge chunk of potential infections.

Malware authors may obtain a temporary lead over antivirus programs, but if you take sensible precautions in addition to running security tools, they won't get a leg up on you.

"Stock" Beats "Sex" On Google China

The names of three banks and the word "stocks" beat "sex" to become four of the most Googled words in China last year, according to a Google China list seen on Thursday.

China Merchants Bank, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and China Construction Bank ranked second, third and sixth, according to a list supplied by Google China on its website (www.google.cn).

"On the Chinese mainland, it was money and technology that took the honors last year," the China Daily said, pointing out that "sex" was the most popular keyword for Google users in some other countries.

Fourth on the list was "stock," not surprising with Shanghai shares having risen 97 percent last year. At number 1 was "QQ," a Chinese instant message service and a brand of car.

China's Central Bank, the Ministry of Finance and Banking Regulatory Commission ranked first, third and fifth in the "Most Popular Departments" list, the Web site said.

In another list named "qiu zhi," or "seeking knowledge," "what is a blue chip" and "how to invest in the stock market" were the most searched questions on Google in China, while "what is love" and "how to kiss" ranked top of the global list.

China keeps a tight rein on Internet content and has launched several campaigns to root out online pornography, perhaps one reason why "sex" did not score so well.

Favorite Time-Wasters of 2007

If you're working anywhere near as hard as I am today, [Note from editor: Oh, like you ever work hard?] then you'll have plenty of time to sit back and enjoy these time wasters - favorites from 2007, plus a few brand-new goodies.

Videos & Animation

Watch this French TV commercial saying that to really enjoy a movie, you have to see it. They use a spoof of the trailer for The March of the Penguins to plug the idea - and it's hilarious.

If you think 24 took a turn for the boring last season, just be thankful that Jack Bauer isn't fighting terror in the age of dial-up connections, pagers, and dot-matrix printers.

Watch "The Day The Routers Died," a well-done musical - and geeky - parody of "American Pie" as performed at a RIPE 55 meeting, a five-day gathering of networking geeks in Amsterdam.

The wind is misunderstood, no doubt. This weird bit of performance art (actually a public-service announcement from an investment firm and a German government agency) will set you straight.

If you liked "Animator vs. Animation," you'll love the author's second version.

Remember when you were a kid and tried your hand making cool shadows? Okay, maybe you didn't. That's why you need to watch this terrific rendition of El Glge Kukla Gsterisi's shadow puppetry set to Louie Armstrong singing "A Wonderful World."

Watch an original play starring Kevin Spacey, made just for the Internet. It's brilliant. (Make sure to click the 2X in the right corner of the frame.)

Microsoft's entry into the mobile phone arena is sure to give Apple a run for the money - and promises to take the nerd world by storm.

Ever heard of Buddy, the famous surfing dog? He's a Jack Russell Terrier and obviously can't wait to get into the water.

Addictive Games

Play FetchFido instead of working. It's easy...all you need to do is touch the black squares and avoid the red ones. Ha!

Marbles is an updated version of Tetris. I didn't do so well.

Launchball is a really, really addicting puzzle game.

Have a deadline? Forget about it If you start playing Bloxorz, you'll kiss the rest of the day good-bye. (BTW, level one's a snap. It's downhill from there.)

"Don't go there!" That was enough of a warning to ensure I'd ignore Brint K.'s advice and spend an hour with DesktopTD. It's not easy, for sure, but it's great for exercising synapses. Fair warning, this isn't a shoot-'em-up. You'll have to spend some time reading the instructions and warming up to the strategies.

You say you like Flash walk-through games, especially while you're sitting in on a boring teleconference? Try this one - it'll keep you busy for at least an hour. Use your arrow keys and be careful - it's easy to get trapped.

Save the cute bunny's life. You've got one minute to do it. So hurry up! (It took me two tries.)

Test Your Smarts

Think you have terrific geography skills? Take your Lufthansa for a quick trip and see if you can land in the right country. (Careful, it's addictive.)

Build your vocabulary with the FreeRice game - and believe it or not, it's real. They really do donate rice to the United Nations World Food Program.

Computer programmer or serial killer? Can you tell the difference? Take the test and see what kind of cop you'd make.

The Japanese IQ Test is incredibly annoying, impossible to solve, and according to Alex, who sent this to me, "a massive, epic waste of time. Epic." No lie. And good luck. (Lots of people have figured this out, though, and I really resent their reasoning powers.)

Are they real or faked photos? I got six correct. Take the Fake or Foto challenge and see how you do.

DIY Projects

Here's a nifty way to write your name in the snow.

Troubled by pesky alien abductions? Only 32 thousandths of an inch of Velostat will set you free.

With a little fiddling (okay, more than a little), you can change the display on HP printers to say just about anything you'd like. It's a cool way to do a number on your office buddies.

Gen Y Tops Internet Use at Libraries

New research is turning traditional thinking about libraries on its head. More than half of U.S. residents visited a library in the past 12 months to use computers instead of search for books, according to a survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Specifically, 58 percent of participants in a national phone survey said they used the Internet at home, work, a public library, or some other place to get help in solving problems during the past two years.

"These findings turn our thinking about libraries upside down," Leigh Estabrook, Dean and Professor Emerita at the University of Illinois, and coauthor of a report on the results of the survey, said in a statement.

Of the 53 percent of U.S. adults who said they visited a library in 2007, young adults age 18 to 30 - commonly known as Generation Y - were the biggest library computer users, according to the Pew study. Compared to their elders, Gen Y members were the most likely to use libraries for problem-solving information and general patronage.

Overall, more than two-thirds of library patrons of all age groups said they used computers during their library visits. What's more, Internet users were more than twice as likely to patronize libraries as non-Internet users.

Young adults said they are most likely to use libraries in the future when they encounter problems: 40 percent of Gen Y said they would do that, compared with 20 percent of those above age 30 who say they would go to a library.

"Librarians have been asked whether the Internet makes libraries less relevant. It has not. Internet use seems to create an information hunger and it is information-savvy young people who are the most likely to visit libraries," Estabrook noted.

According to Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet & American Life Project, and one of the study's authors, it is important to stress that even though data shows the Internet is growing more popular, many people do not use the Internet.

This low-access population prefers getting information and assistance from sources other than the Internet. "Those without broadband connections at home or at work have very different needs and search strategies from those who have woven the Internet into their lives," Rainie said in a statement.

Another focus of the research was to see how the rise of the Internet might affect the way government officials and librarians could work to meet citizen needs.

Evans Witt, CEO of Princeton Survey Research Associates International, the firm that conducted the survey and one of the report's authors, said the big message in this survey is that those who want to help - whether they sit in government offices, libraries, nonprofit organizations, or politically active groups - live in a much more complicated environment now than they did a decade ago.

"They must serve citizen needs that run the spectrum from high-tech digerati who want everything served to them online to grandparents in rural areas who want the government to mail them key documents that are printed on real paper with real ink," Witt said in a statement.

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